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ABSTRACT

The culture of Catholic education is based on profoundly human qualities animated by freedom and by faith. Because all aspects of Catholic education are intrinsically religious acts, teachers are free to teach all subjects for their own sake. Educators have the freedom to insist that everything in Catholic education be first rate, including equipment and extracurricular programs, and they are free to work longer than 40 hours each week to ensure such quality. Students are free to admit to themselves and to others that school is interesting and that they would rather be there than elsewhere. Nevertheless, Catholic educators have an obligation to make Catholic schools worth the cost difference as well as reflect the faith which makes that difference. Some disappointing trends create challenges: (1) there are fewer areas of agreement between Catholics and other citizens; (2) Catholic families increasingly use public higher education; (3) there is a declining number of religious men and women as virtually free labor for school systems; (4) class discipline and the inability to expel students with behavior problems is a concern; and (5) it is difficult to reconcile the Catholic school system's aims with the teachers' unions' aims. Catholic educators should be assertive on the school voucher issue and on the need for religion in public life, and should insist that Catholic education be valued for its convictions, not just its discipline and uniforms. Catholic educators face challenges in their freedom to do their job well and to animate it by faith. The American Catholic educational experience has been one of the glories of the Church for more than two centuries. (KDFB)

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NATIONAL CATHOLIC EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

APRIL 12, 1996

BROTHER PATRICK ELLIS, F.S.C.

EDUCATION FOR FAITH AND FREEDOM

Dear Friends:

This invitation came too late for my inclusion in the preliminary program which is therefore now a collectible. Folded four times, it is very useful under the short leg of a table, or in a window sash on a stormy night. Still, after my period of indecision--about 15 seconds--I have had time to cobble this together from forty-five years in this enterprise at all levels. Conscious that you could all match the illustrative examples, I shall, however, try to make them original and appropriate. Don't we all tell our students, "Support your facile generalizations with abundant specific examples." But could I speak in public forty minutes and not jeopardize the funding of my own institution? And, could I do it without being hopelessly bland?

That will be for you to decide, and may inject a note of morbid interest. We may have before us, as we have had all week, someone balancing justice to his or her staff (the payroll) with justice to his or her own deeply held convictions.

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Brother Patrick Ellis
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Ya' vain thing! That assumes people are listening to your convictions and are concerned about your prudence.

The wonderful umbrella topic is faith and freedom. I propose to bounce off one and the other in as coherent a manner as possible. The spatial image is that of a pinball in a pinball machine. Remember those?

As we get started, I think one of our freedoms is necessarily to enjoy the spontaneous things that can happen in education at all levels, Catholic and otherwise, but particularly in the atmosphere of our schools. For example, the youngster who was told by the study hall prefect, who got his pocket watch out so as to dismiss a minute before the rest of the school--he wanted to have it quite precise--so he said to the youngster in sophomore M, "Go out and set this by the office clock." So, of course, a few minutes later the youngster came back, took his seat in the study hall, and the Brother said, "Where's the watch, where's the watch," and with a meaningful indication, gesture, the young man said, "You told me to set it by the office clock--it's out there." So similarly the reform school student in the day branch of the school learned that someone was ill at home and instead of saying anything to anybody in authority, went into the office, took the car keys out of the secretary's pocketbook and went on home. When he was, of course, apprehended with the car, they said to him, "Well, we understand you had this emergency but why didn't you take a bus?" And the youngster said, of course, "I can't drive a bus." This is reminiscent, by the way, of George and Gracie.

"Gracie, what are you doing with that bouquet?" "Well I just went to visit Ann in the hospital and you told me to take her flowers, so when she wasn't looking, I...." [A little more complicated one: some of us may recall the 50's when there was a little confusion between fire drills and air raid drills. This may take some of the senior people to recall it, but where I was there were two different sets of bells. The fire drill, of course, caused us all to leave the building, go across the street, or out onto the football field, while an air raid drill caused us to go out into the corridors and sit with our heads on our knees, presumably to go in with the building rather than have it come in on us had we gone all to the basement floor. Needless to say, the principal, a man of vision, thought it would be a nice idea to have one of these without warning, specifically an air raid drill. The vice principal, being a tad more practical, as is often enough the case, felt that the interval since the last one made this fraught with the possibility of confusion, but, of course, the principal prevailed, the lever was thrown, and exactly half the school thought it was an air raid drill and half of it a fire drill. The resulting pageant; some standing out on the football field waiting for the arrival of the bombs and others, of course, equally vulnerable to incineration sitting along the corridors. But that one took a while to get over and, needless to say, unannounced drills were few and far between from that point on.] One of our men was inspecting the very zealous teaching efforts of a brand new Brother in a very slow math class in a high school not to be named, but not the one you think, and he was trying to be relevant in teaching math. This will tell you when it was. If Dr. J scored six baskets in seven attempts in the first few minutes of play, what was his percentage? Answer: "Dr. J didn't play last night, Brother, he had a sprained ankle."

Oh, back to the drawing board. "Well, if Michael Schmidt had three hits and a walk in five times at bat, what's his percentage at bat?" "Oh, Brother, Mike has been on a long drought, he hasn't hit in days!" Yes. "Well now, if Cunningham threw six successful passes right in a row and missed only two, what was his percentage of completion?" "Oh, he was only in a couple of minutes yesterday." "Well, all right, look, look, look, Bernie Parent has 11 saves out of 15 shots on goal, could you let me have his percentage." One boy leaned over to the Brother who was inspecting the class and said, "Oh, I don't do hockey questions." So you do have enough interesting moments in the profession to pep it up.

We're the freest system around. We are free to teach at all levels subjects for their own sake. We recognize the sacredness of the whole enterprise intrinsically. We have the great advantage of rendering a secular good for a religious purpose. We have a marvelous opportunity, like people in health care whether their faith commitment is healthy at a given moment or not, we have the great grace of being able to offer something that they need and will be grateful for but which does not depend every minute of every day on their having a vibrant faith. They may be preliminary to it or seeking it. But if they're not, even so, this is still a great enterprise. And, it's like the famous game of pool, that I don't know what the game could actually have been, but Aloysius Gonzaga was supposed to be involved in. He was asked what would he do if he got word he was to die in 20 minutes. And, of course, he said "I would finish the game," and I think that is precisely our situation. What we're doing is intrinsically a religious act, not just in the old superficial sense of offering it up every

morning, although God knows I hope we do, but rather that the enterprise of Catholic education--whether you run the bookstore or whether you teach mathematics or religion, whether you are in administration or raising the money for it, the fact of the matter is that the bloomin' thing is in itself praising God. And even those who design the buildings... so it goes. I think we know this and it saves us, I think, a great deal of soul searching some days to realize that about it. We are free in the same connection, then, as I said, to teach subjects for their own sake. We're not obliged to choose literature that promotes good citizenship or buddyhood or piety; we can choose literature that is stimulatingly ironic, we can choose literature for depth of thought, we can choose it to move the emotions, to shock us out of our complacency, because all we have to do is use good literary norms for the purpose of our selections. Therefore, we are so free of many of the pressures which dog our colleagues in other circumstances. Now I'm never going to say anything negative about our colleagues in other circumstances. These are not the days when you do that. At the same time, we have certainly to recognize and rejoice in our own situation.

We are free to insist that everything about the place be first rate. I have never been too keen on those who felt that an inferior brass band, for example, should perform as part of its psychological formation, that it should have an audience ready or not. To me, this is not quite a secular blasphemy but it is certainly something which I wouldn't agree with. I think that they owe it to the rest of the school to be ready, but I can understand the theory that performance for an audience is part of the education, but I would certainly hope a competent

performance. Nevertheless, St. John Baptist de la Salle, founder of our Order, said that there should be no trade-offs between religion and everything else. The parents shouldn't have to put up with an inferior school just in order to have religious instruction so that in terms of modern times, equipment, currency of the teachers with the developments in the fields, certainly extracurricular programs, often, of course, others long since abandoned like forensics and debate, dramatics, music. All of these things must be first rate right along with the religious instruction. "The cross out front is a proclamation, not an excuse." We're free to insist on this. We're free to work weekends without violating, so far as is known, union prohibitions, so to do. We're not free to make lay colleagues work all night--we don't want to do that--but the fact is, members of the sponsoring body and all others are certainly allowed to do more than the minimum. And students eventually are free--it takes a long time--to admit to themselves and to one another that the place is interesting, that they'd rather be there than not, though they have, of course, to maintain a facade as if something died in the corner, a look of numb disdain, in order to keep their friends. Well, certainly in good time they must be free to admit that the place is interesting, that the people in it are, and largely because, not that they're an exceedingly gifted group everywhere but that they're there freely and they're working for Jesus ultimately.

So we have an obligation, then, in addition to all our freedoms, we have an obligation to make our schools worth the difference. We can no longer do the remarkable job of yesteryear of running the places on air. We have no choice but to charge something like

what it costs, though we have, of course, many other sources we have to cultivate, but we certainly have to be worth the difference, and sometimes we do have some folks who can afford just that difference, so long as they don't ever get together and find out how few they are!

Faith animates it all. Faith and freedom is this nice umbrella topic, but faith is not the fire department, called on only when all else fails; faith is, on the contrary, an animating force, grace actually, all the time--not always explicitly, not always consciously up front, but certainly always there. If we just keep it for emergencies when reason fails or when our feelings are letting us down or our moods are swinging, then it mightn't be as vital as we need in a crisis, but it will be if we have it there all the time. We can't always be superheated. Like the poet who revises his outcry six times. People say "isn't that an outcry?" Well yes, sure, but it was revised six times. It's mostly a question of daily perseverance after the outcry, and we're in an analogous situation, I think.

Not that the last 45 years have been a royal progress. If there is a disappointment of a hope that we once held but never quite articulated, it was that we thought we could be integrally Catholic and still popular in the United States. That really started to fade on college campuses in the 60's but most of all in '73 with Roe v. Wade. We had to start taking unpopular positions and at the same time <u>accept</u> that the Church wasn't going to budge from them. We may have hoped at one time that there would be some more areas of agreement

with the society around us, than have in fact developed, but we certainly knew fairly early on that the hope that we could be integrally Catholic and at the same time universally popular was a faint one.

Roman Catholic families discovered public higher education along about the 60's and 70's with its wonderful economy and often its fine quality, so that we no longer had a lock on the market, nor did we have the kind of popularity with our clients that would cause them to opt for us. We had, ourselves, religious Orders and others, the dilemma at the graduate level whether to go with the struggling and often excellent graduate programs under Catholic auspices or get out of the ghetto and go to either a handy or excellent or handy and excellent nearby graduate school. We certainly have had to make a number of individual decisions about this so that we didn't deny ourselves the opportunity to get into the famous mainstream, hmmm.

And of course there was the end of religious as virtually free labor for school systems. Not only did we decrease in number relatively and absolutely, but the needs of religious themselves, particularly for retirement financing and health care, certainly have grown exponentially along with the decline, perhaps just as well, of those medicals and others who gave free care to religious as part of their apostolate. This true cost began to become inescapable for the faithful, but the presence of fewer children per family should have eased the burden.

The first time a layman taught better than a Brother or a laywoman taught better than a Sister had to cause agonized rethinking. All the way back in the 50's, early 50's, in some few cases late 40's, this had to cause much agonized rethinking on the part of the men and women religious because why were we giving up what our young colleagues clearly had. Young families, a rewarding apostolate, of course rickshaw wages and quite a struggle, but until we rethought our colleagueship with our lay companions, we really had much thinking to do about our own vocation. Thus long before Vatican II, we began to work our way through that particular commitment.

Please don't think I'm getting back into 50's nostalgia. You all remember the candy stores in the middle of the city neighborhoods in the perfect devout parishes, which were packed and jammed on Sunday morning with the ones who didn't go to Mass, who set out for Mass, but jammed their way in there such that when the door opened the cigarette smoke came out cohesively in the shape of the door and stayed oblong for about ten feet out into the open air before it broke up. But they would, of course, waylay the good kids on the way home, find out who had the Mass, what the Gospel was, and what the sermon was about so they could go home and pretend they had been there. The 50's were not notable for the repeal of original sin anymore than the 90's.

We did then have to realize at a certain point that we were never going to be completely popular in American society, but I do not equate that with the deliberate courting of unpopularity, the courting of some kind of social martyrdom which had best be done only with an awareness of very, very special graces and at the risk of alienating the Church from the general population, so that courting unpopularity in the name of authenticity is an equally incomplete vision as trying never to upset people with our beliefs. One sure thing is that the relationship of faith and society will never fully be settled. We will have to teach with certitude while we deal with mystery, and we have to be honest about both, which is not going to get any simpler.

We have had a dandy week-long look at ourselves K through U. Our firsthand awareness of our strengths and weaknesses has seldom been keener, though perhaps assuaged by comparison with others. We all have probably to avoid disappointment through low expectations but, " It wasn't as bad as I expected," that is as high praise as you get from some. It could have been worse, a touch Irish, and the ultimate in kicking over the traces when such a colleague says it was better than I expected, heaven knows how bad he or she expected it to be.

We do face challenges in our freedom, in our freedom to do our job well and in our animating it by faith. I think at all levels we do face challenges that perhaps in the past we did not in the same degree. There are whole classes, it seems to me, even in Catholic

schools, that never quite shut up and for whom the teachers are unable to apply that great maxim of St. La Salle, "Don't talk while they're talking." Now it can be, of course, perilous to wait them out. You have to have a whole bag of tricks on that, as we know, because they can wait you out. There are classes even in our schools where teachers govern by compact with bullies. What are the bullies' terms and what does the teacher have to sacrifice ultimately in order to have that false order of a class where the bullies keep the rest in order? Of course we know, we can't give a half day any more: where would they go on a day when all kinds of things go wrong. We can't send them home any more nor have we been able to in many cities for the last 40 years. I remember public schools were starting to provide breakfast in Florida in 1963. We got around to it soon enough ourselves because of the two job families. Neither can we throw people out for discipline. We've often been accused, I think quite falsely, of being able to toss out anybody who was the least bit problematic so that when we preen ourselves on the excellent order of our schools our colleagues will say "sure, but you can throw them out." Do we all know how exceedingly rare it is to send away even the most blatant these days. We can't quite count on parental backing the way we once could, but again we never could. We haven't really been able in many areas to count on that kind of backing for 40 years. BUT WAIT, didn't principals in the 50's put the worst classes farthest from the lobby so an outsider would never hear the chaos in there. Weren't weak teachers merely moved around a lot? In one of our Provinces which had 42 communities, we called it "the grand tour," one year in each for a career of 42 years. In another Province with large communities, but fewer, we had what was known as the Philadelphia-Pittsburgh shuttle,

and certain ones greeted each other annually at the horseshoe curve. Because of two things: we had to use folks who were not apt for our apostolate but we had no other apostolate for them and we had no replacements anyhow, so the concept was that no one class in a block roster would have more than its share of such folks, and there was always the irony that some of them did more good through the example of patient suffering, not to say martyrdom, at the hands of the students. Once in a while a student will tell you that the edifying example of a person who put up with that did more for him than all the showboats who were fully successful. I never quite believed it but you can't always argue with them. Weren't huge communities thought of as able to contain difficult people just like large faculties today? Aren't some of us grateful that was the case. Laterally, do all teachers' unions in Catholic schools think of the students first, the common good of the whole place second, and, of course, their own members in the light of the common good? Have we ever fully reconciled all of the aims of the system with the laudable aims of the unions. BUT WAIT AGAIN, the great random insight suddenly communicated by a bumbling rambler has been with us for many, many years, similarly the idea that a highly successful teacher had better fight the onset of pride and the feeling of accomplishment.

Isn't it interesting that each of us is part of a school that is certainly above average, superior to most, yet lucky to have me the great to carry some of the dead wood around here? I certainly hope that this is true. You're here; the dead wood is back home.

As an exercise of our freedom, it is time for us to be a little more assertive at all levels, I think.. Let's start answering the letters of high dudgeon as they deserve to be answered, without, of course, getting sued. Write them and shred them.

The letter of high dudgeon is really the only thriving form of rhetoric in the United States today and it begins "how can you call yourselves a Catholic school when you [fill in the blanks] won't return my daughter's deposit just because she got a better offer three weeks into the semester from a nearby apartment house," etc. of this. More later on.

We have to assert ourselves freely still on the voucher thing because op.eds. and editorial pages love to cast us in a rather grasping and greedy mode, as if those vouchers would make that big a difference. They would help, they would take some of the unjust burden off our people. The vouchers would be such a minuscule fraction of the total work of the place that we would hardly be profiteering, and we know that, but we can't get the word out.

I have recently advised students, however, not to go to student aid rallies in the BMW, or to complain to a reporter that they may have to come back early from Cancun.

I think it's time we were more freely assertive on the need for religion in public life. Not, of course, that we would impose it but that one basic principle, the philosophy of the person, at least has a chance in public discourse without lapsing into the imposition by one group, fundamentalist or otherwise.

I think we ought to insist that we be valued for what we deeply stand for, NOT for discipline and uniforms and all the other things which make us a kind of convenience. Colleagues desire the common good. Few are in it to get rich. We have the great good example of our coworkers who are, indeed, witnessing to a goal in life beyond possessions, obviously.

People want their leaders to do well. Very few hope that the leaders will fall flat on their faces. It's not good for the place and it's an edgy moment and it's not good for the people's own advantages in a stable institution, so they want us to do well, and often out of kindness and out of faith-based charity for us.

Truth has a better chance in the long run than error. Its unity across many disciplines sustains us. It is, of course, an attribute of God and the very nourishment of the faith. The very fact that we seek truth does not mean that no truth has ever been found. It's surprising what news that is in hugely prestigious circles within our country. Openness is not the only virtue. If it is, the result is a kind of nihilism that brought on the 60's from a generation in

the 30's and 40's of debunkers on campuses. Then along came the 60's, children of that generation, who had not been given anything debunkable with the result of a certain flailing about and generalized dissatisfaction that was not beneficial in the long run, one can certainly say. So that openness is not the only virtue. There was a 17-minute inaugural at an extremely prestigious institution not too many years ago. I kept thinking to myself, will not the new president ever let us know what to be open to, what to be open for.

The Church wants us to do well. Colleagues with authority hang-ups are becoming (a) fewer, (b) more shrill, (c) less dominant and trend-setting than they were. I think we all went through this. The common good, however, may suggest avoiding confrontation unless absolutely necessary for one's integrity. It's amazing how often a mutual understanding can be arrived at for reasons other than craven ones. Because the Church people themselves want us to do well. The best of Church authorities and some of the toughest don't like to see us grovel. It's not a pretty sight and it doesn't nourish any person in good mental health to see that going on.

I think also, though, we have to risk occasional controversy by insisting that we're not in the protection business after the students reach a certain age and even in gradual stages all through their educational process. We don't exist to prolong childhood or adolescence but to help young people get over childhood and become adults, and therefore protection is not the

main thing we do. And of course we have to respect the free gift of faith. We are Catholic not in what we impose but in what we offer, and we should offer it stunningly well.

Could it be that our faith and freedom offer the last hope for our people? For America, really. The society doesn't think so; it is content to survey uninformed opinions, but, you know an uninformed opinion is just that, but 600 of them for an inquiring reporter become data, and I think there can be madness down that road. Society doesn't exist in itself. It is a construct of many minds reasoning in circles without any nourishment from outside themselves. It--whatever it is--it's a mental construct, of course, constantly warns its constituents to beware of people who claim to have revelation. All such are effectively lumped together somewhere between fanaticism and fundamentalism and invited to go away, please. At least be quiet.

My suggestion is that we do have care of certain truths but that we might do well to be diffident of our own worthiness to convey them adequately. But even this awareness must not silence us within the limits of our confidence and sincerity, because we are light years ahead of the abstraction called "society." And--dare I drop the other shoe--the Church puts her teaching authority not only at our disposal but largely in our hands. We're the main contact with it in many lives, with all our faults.

Maybe we had to go through a period when many religious educators dealt with their own authority hang-ups and thus muted anything to do with Church, answering instead to the well-documented thirst of the young for spirituality as distinct from Church. That, and the experiential route of community service, can certainly be vehicles of grace. Certainly are. But I submit that we must also teach the saving word, welcome and unwelcome, in season and out, recognizing readiness and running, as the catechetical movement has so nobly done, and running the risks of life at the outer edge of doctrinal and ethical fidelity, but inside it, please.

While justice to the students and to the very Church requires us to be the best educators we can be--undaunted by society and by the distractions that beset our students--we will certainly some day ignite the emerging virtue of OUTRAGE with its certitude-driven vehicle, the letter or phone call, of high dudgeon, to which I referred earlier.

No good deed goes unpunished. Admit the unqualified and the parents will surely sue when frustration sets in. Admit the marginal: competition will fry you for lowering standards and so will your own editors and faculty whose pay depends on the admission of the marginal, actually. The type of editor who, in a student newspaper, says "I hate to be surrounded by dolts in class." Not an attractive type of person. You show Christian compassion and you will be scorched for being permissive.

The practitioners of outraged certitude have, in some instances, a great deal of money. An administrator, in the interest of paying a just salary, may be tempted to suggest muting the Church's social teachings in order not to embarrass friends of the institution. There's a quagmire, but I will shun it as a digression.

In higher education just now, I think it is safe to say that we are more comfortable with Church--no adjectives, please--than we were for some time. Don't get me wrong. We went through the whole cycle of entering that elusive mainstream, motivated by the need to do simple justice to our primary clientele, and we were alert to the potential of litigation about government aid to our students as well. That leadership put up with the often facile accusations of abandoning the Catholic commitment of the institution. Thanks, however, to a decade of dialogue about *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, I suggest that we as a sector are much more fully in touch with the Church in the persons of its leaders, without the loss of fundamental academic values, and without disloyalty to that wonderful generation who brought us into the mainstream.

The American Catholic educational experience has been one of the glories of the Church for two centuries and more. For us, it is a movement not in which to lose ourselves but to find ourselves. To affirm its many qualities we need not denigrate our colleagues in other systems. If they're really trying to do us in, our best bet may simply be not to mention them, <u>ever</u>, like some old political campaigners. Just publish our pluses.

Yes, ours are lives poured out. We never have to feel that we've wasted a day, especially in the light of eternity. Knowledge all by itself modifies a person forever, despite our inadequacies in conveying it. It modifies the person especially in that component of his or her being which will never die.

I thought for years that I had isolated a trait of Catholic institutions: that in our marketing we must always say we are getting better but never that we needed to (because the people from years ago are still here). But I am told we share that much more broadly with other sectors of education. I note this trait because I have tried to affirm this morning in a manner that is faintly untypical for those who know me and may in fact seem rather crafty. But as long as it is all true, so be it.

Even the labors of colleagues in those other systems must not be the object of our condescension. Thousands of Catholics so spend themselves at all levels with greater or lesser support from their systems. My point today has been that despite our individual shortcomings at all levels, the reality of Catholic education in the United States is a huge, stunning actual grace, based in profoundly human qualities and animated by faith in Jesus.

I certainly hope that this past week for each of you, no two alike, represents a useful and even rewarding fusion of the specific and the general. Amidst the packed luggage ringing the room, the final speaker risks presumption trying to add anything. But if the awareness of whom ultimately we work for is liberating--and there are days when it surely is--and it's certainly not society and it's Church mainly as mediating Jesus--if there are days then when this awareness makes us free in faith, then I can hope to have used your time well.